

International Business Forum of Bangladesh (IBFB)
Launching Ceremony
Ambassador's Remarks
Thursday, September 14, 2006 at 11:00am

President of IBFB Mahmudul Islam Chowdhury, Distinguished IBFB board members,

Honored Guest Professor Whaid Uddin Mahmud, Special Guest Dr. Stefan Frowein,

IBFB members and prospective members, Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,
Asalaamu Alaikum and Good Morning!

I am extremely honored to take part in the formal launching of the International Business Forum of Bangladesh, better known as IBFB. I know it has been a long path for the IBFB board members and I would like to congratulate the President of IBFB, Mahmud Chowdhury, and the other dedicated IBFB board members on their recently created business agenda.

I understand the IBFB membership recently had a two day conference in which all members had the opportunity to identify issues of concern for doing business in Bangladesh and to formulate proposed solutions and strategies. While IBFB members have done much work leading up to this launch today, the hard work of reforming policy is just beginning. Today marks an opportunity for others interested in business reform to learn about IBFB's mission and work.

I'd like to take this moment to provide a little history about the IBFB founding members and their vision. The founding IBFB board members approached us in 2004 with the idea of beginning an advocacy group for independent, non-partisan business persons who are committed to improving the business climate in Bangladesh. The first question we had for this group and a question I'm certain they have heard many times while recruiting members is, what makes IBFB unique and why does Bangladesh need yet another business group with the current plethora of chambers and business associations? For example, there are several existing associations to serve particular memberships

such as garments, textiles, vegetable exporters, to name only a few. There are also important economic think tanks which analyze issues and produce policy briefs. There are chambers that serve as umbrella groups, provide an opportunity for networking and grant licenses. Many of these organizations have held high profile conferences on topics such as the importance of corporate governance and business ethics. Business groups have also shown solidarity by signing joint press releases on such issues as highlighting the damage hartals bring to the economy.

All of these business associations and chambers are doing important work, which IBFB can build upon and complement through focusing uniquely on advocating for economic policy reform. What is also distinctive about IBFB is that it serves both individuals and businesses nationwide. International members who have businesses in Bangladesh are also welcome to join. Furthermore, IBFB selects issues that affect many businesses such as the need for a level playing field, easier exporting processes and improved regulatory policies. Finally, IBFB is taking a practical approach to reform by setting its sight on concrete goals that are achievable in the short-term rather than focusing on overarching long-term goals such as combating corruption or eliminating hartals.

There are also a variety of methods groups use to advocate for their demands. While confrontational tactics may have proved to be effective in certain circumstances, there is certainly space for a more constructive, substantive yet bold approach toward reform.

From my understanding, IBFB intends to engage in professional and productive dialogue with different stakeholders by presenting issues of concern in a clear way and presenting solutions to people who are in a position to change policies. Rather than presenting a list of multiple demands, the group will identify issues that are of most concern to its membership, identify solutions and then strategize on different tactics to press for reform. Selecting doable issues that resonate with the general businessperson and choosing the right mix of advocacy tactics will be important, especially in this group's first few months.

Many people will be observing IBFB to see what they stand for, what they can do, and how they are different from the rest.

I am confident that once a group has one small success, the next one will come more easily. Trying to reform a system overnight will only lead to frustration, but tackling one individual challenge at a time over the long-run can and does lead to reform.

IBFB was created to serve the Bangladesh business community and - just as important - to open new and more transparent channels of communication between the business community and the government of Bangladesh. Relationship building and negotiation on all sides is thus important.

IBFB's intends to serve the business community by identifying and advocating for policy changes and regulatory reforms that strengthen the business environment, enhance opportunities for new business development, and create conditions for accelerated economic growth from which every Bangladeshi citizen will benefit, not just the particular members who have joined this group.

At the same time, IBFB's goal is to serve Bangladesh's democracy by developing an advocacy model that stresses transparency, consensus building, and accountability. Too often, when we think of civil society, and its vital role in strengthening democracy, we fail to adequately consider the business community as a part of that group which has an essential role to play in building strong bridges to link citizens with their elected government. The business community is, however, a vital part of civil society and has a critical role to play not only in the formation of the nation's economy, but also in the consolidation of its democracy.

IBFB, under the leadership of its President and its Board of Directors, is off to a good start. To date, they have already attracted over 50 dues paying members from the business community in all regions of Bangladesh and their membership is continuing to grow at a steady pace. The modest logistical and technical assistance that has been extended to IBFB by USAID through the

International Republican Institute has been utilized productively and has been a successful partnership.

We look forward over the next year to IBFB issuing a number of new surveys that will help the entire business community articulate its concerns and priorities, and contribute to a more constructive and productive dialogue between the business community and Bangladesh government agencies at all levels.

Now that IBFB has officially launched, it will have the opportunity to build coalitions with other groups and promote its business agenda to all of the political parties. We look forward to seeing a substantive issue-based dialogue between IBFB and other parties on potential solutions to business challenges. In an election year, this is a particularly special opportunity. A successful advocacy group is one whose proposals are incorporated into political parties' platforms. The next measure of success of effective lobbying is whether or not legislation has been proposed and ultimately passed. We look forward over the next year to watching IBFB promote its business agenda and encourage IBFB to engage other business groups on issues of common interest.

I believe IBFB will stand the test of time if it remains non-partisan, transparent, and internally democratic. Many groups at their inception have created good rules and procedures and even follow them in the early stages. Unfortunately as time goes by, enforcement of those procedures begins to slide. Transparency as well as internal democracy and participation is vital to the long-term success of any group. IBFB is planning to form several committees. This is an excellent opportunity for younger people to participate and focus on specific sectors of interest. Any group is only as good as the sum of its members. A group of 20 committed and active members is better than a group of 300 with only one active leader.

My thanks to the International Business Forum of Bangladesh (IBFB) for inviting me to be the chief guest at this important event and I wish IBFB members every success in its advocacy model that stresses, transparency, consensus building and accountability.

Onek dhonnoabad o khodhafez.

